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Robert Schwartz, *Rethinking Pragmatism: From William James to Contemporary Philosophy*, West Sussex, UK, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 184 pp.

Nowadays philosophers as intellectuals are strongly encouraged to be more active on their cultural scene and particularly to direct their efforts towards creating or reconstructing possible *bridges* of communication. As is well known, some of the distances between intellectual worlds are often matters of ‘styles of writing,’ as well as socio-historical controversies which can be reconsidered in a different light at successive generational readings. In this view, both historical and theoretical tools are important for ‘rereading’ and ‘rethinking’ theories which undeniably have had great “influence and impact on our culture and institutions.” The very harsh critiques that Pragmatists received from all over the world, especially in the first half of the 20th century, may be more the result of obstinate misunderstandings than of concrete incommunicability. As an example, John Dewey criticizes the ‘wishful thinking’ caricature of William James’s work as arising from the lack of imagination of his readers (LW 15: 15). Robert A. Schwartz made a serious attempt to re-think and re-activate the interest for some of the issues raised by James in *Pragmatism. A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (James 1907). His theoretical efforts are influenced by Nelson Goodman’s and W. V. O. Quine’s epistemologies and he is truly sympathetic to Pragmatism and the American philosophical tradition. Despite his original intention to explore classical American Pragmatists’ main themes, considering their implications for contemporary issues in ‘epistemology,’ ‘language’ and ‘metaphysics,’ Schwartz decided to narrow and deepen his analysis; he focused upon the book by the author who may be recognized worldwide as the “spokesperson” of Pragmatism, being “the intellectual pivot of the movement, looking back to C. S. Peirce and pointing ahead to Dewey” (4). Bearing Peirce and particularly Dewey in mind, his work may thus be read as an intense conversation with James about his Pragmatist account of ‘inquiry,’ ‘language’ and ‘truth.’

The primary goal of Schwartz’s lecture-by-lecture commentary on James’s 1907 work is “to explain and explore the implications of Pragmatic ideas, not to defend or criticize them” (5). Carrying on his analysis, he points out that he “looks ahead, not back”; that is to say that his way to rethink issues James unfolded throughout his presentations is to consider them in the light of more contemporary debates. Evidently, each chapter of Schwartz’s book focuses upon one lecture of *Pragmatism*, and from titles of the chapters the reader can understand the line of his interpretation of James’s lectures. This choice is a revelation of his intense personal involvement with James’s views, and that is what makes this book so challenging for Pragmatism scholars.

Before addressing the first lecture, there is a brief chapter in which the author recollects the themes he considers to be in the *background* of the Pragmatists’ ideas. As is well known, their approach to philosophical inquiry was that of the scientific method – according to James the *empiricist tendency* was the most diffused mentality of his times – being also deeply influenced by A. Bain’s psychology and C. Darwin’s theory of evolution, which suggested “both the biological and the mental continuity of species” (10). Despite this, the Pragmatists’ anti-Cartesianism and fallibilistic stance,

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their attention to behavior as well as their insistence upon functions, should not be easily labelled or misunderstood. More specifically, Schwartz acknowledges James's original interest in individual experiences with respect to Peirce's and Dewey's work, and shares the mainstream interpretation of his study of the function of our minds in his *Principles of Psychology* (James 1890) as in deep continuity with his epistemological and metaphysical positions. Interesting references to Peirce and Dewey, and contextual connections for instance to T. Kuhn, J. L. Austin and Quine, are pertinently given throughout the book, which also offers cross-references to James's other main works.

Commenting on James's most famous *lectures*, and staying future-oriented, the author aims to corroborate his view of James as "an epistemic and meaning holist" (115) as well as a fallibilist, a radical pluralist and a "pragmatist instrumentalist" (86). In this view, 'The Place of Values in Inquiry' is a deep reading of James's first lecture of *Pragmatism*. The influence of 'temperaments' or 'sentiments,' he argues, "cannot be ignored without distorting the nature of objective inquiry" (20). Schwartz suggests here close similarities with Quine's and Goodman's references to 'aesthetic preference' and 'philosophic conscience.' Moreover, if James is talking about different 'philosophies of inquiry,' in this respect then his view can also be compared to Kuhn's "Paradigms, as James's 'philosophies,' are not themselves theories but approaches to a domain that sets the concepts employed, the way problems are formulated, the evidence taken to be relevant [...]. Scientists have faith in the paradigms they work within" (23). Of course, the problem here is not "to step over the line of values, preferences and temperaments that have epistemic legitimacy" (23) and how such a position may resist the possible collapse between "objective inquiry" and "subjective bias." Schwartz is well-aware of all these difficulties, but also of James's 'pragmatic theory of inquiry' which is rooted in the possibility for philosophies to be valuable and challenged on rational grounds.

In the second chapter, 'The Pragmatic Maxim and Pragmatic Instrumentalism,' James's meaning of Pragmatism is in focus. Schwartz underlines convergences as well as differences with Peirce and Dewey as internal nuances of the common Pragmatist project. The fifth chapter, 'Ontological Commitment and the Nature of the Real,' is particularly interesting in terms of its elucidation of Schwartz's general interpretation of James's view. The author argues that James's goal in his fifth lecture is to "explicate the nature of human inquiry" both according to his "web-of-belief model of inquiry" and in support of his epistemic holism. The point Schwartz wants to make here is that "the very idea of an inquiry-independent, preexisting complete world of facts awaiting description and explanation is a myth" (79). So in talking about actual inquiry, James states that "knowledge grows *in spots*" (James 1907: 82), and the way in which the practice of science develops is rather conservative. As far as possible, preference is given to old beliefs, which sometimes means also contesting or even dismissing evidence which supports new beliefs. The meaning of a new belief is pragmatically found in the consequences engendered by its acceptance into an older system of beliefs. This tells us that science and the concepts it employs are *living things* continually threatening to "expand and contract along unpredictable paths" (80). But then, how can we explain

the longevity of some of our ideas? As is well known, James offers here an historical-genetic hypothesis in which *common sense*, *science* and *critical philosophy* are the three main stages of the historical evolution of human understanding. They are three different ways of categorizing experience which have developed in different times and according to different and changing needs. Such a hypothetical reconstruction should first and foremost be considered as an alternative to either Plato's world of ideas or whatever theory claims the perfect correspondence of concepts and the structure of the world. James's theory rather emphasizes the convenience of common sense concepts as tools which prove to be still useful in our dealing with ordinary experiences; he also underlines the important role played by linguistic use in preserving these relatively old concepts. The three stages of knowledge, in fact, are continuous since they did not come about *abruptly*, but each one, bursting the limits of previous classification, have offered a new systematization of experience according to different exigencies. In this respect, to a certain extent reality is *plastic* and does not impose too strict limits on our possibility to organize it by using different conceptual schemes. Incidentally, Schwartz considers James's view of ontology "uninformative," just like Quine's, when he replied to the ontological question "*What is there?*" by: "Everything." In other words, "there is no sensible answer to the question independent of a background category scheme into which the answer fits and gains meaning" (81). This is the most interesting aspect of what there is, that is to say our creative contribution to answering the ontological question. The complexity of our conceptual systems is mainly due to the historical stratification of meanings: we can never restart from a zero point, we always have to deal with productions of human history. Even "concepts and kinds that seem natural are not natural by nature. Their naturalness is due to their history of constant and continuous use" (81).

The author then carefully analyzes James's arguments regarding the evolving nature of concepts. These latter spring from our efforts to *posit* continuity according to practical-aesthetical exigencies, as we have mentioned. We need both to give a logical order to reality and to get a predictive grasp on it. Schwartz evidences the distinction made by James between the development of common sense concepts and that of scientific concepts in respect to the issue of experiential continuity. More specifically, considering the concept "thing," he points out two different ways in which we posit conceptual continuity to fill in discontinuities. We may *interpolate* present and past experiences, which is the common sense view: everyday objects endure over time and place; also, we may have scientific objects which are "products of analogical *extrapolation*" (84). The world of scientific theoretical entities, which are employed in theories, are extrapolated "beyond the common sense world." There is an important point about James's instrumentalist view that Schwartz aims at making here. He wishes to clarify that James's and Dewey's pragmatism cannot be placed within the realist/anti-realist dichotomy debate: James is a "Pragmatist instrumentalist" and, as such, his own challenge to classical semantics "does not entail an ontologically significant distinction between apples, automobiles, and atoms" (90). To avoid anti-realist misunderstandings, James used to define himself a "natural realist." Nonetheless, the use he makes of the word 'real' is "contrastive"

and Schwartz thinks that it is consistent with Austin's idea that "the attempt to find a characteristic common to all things that are or could be called 'real' is doomed to failure; the function of 'real' is [...] to exclude possible ways of *not* being real" (85). Already in his *Principles of Psychology*, he presented the case of hallucinations, arguing that assertions incompatible with the "otherwise known world" give rise to our suspicion that something is unreal. However, in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James pragmatically defines what is 'real' as anything of which "we find ourselves obliged to take account of in any way" (James 1911: 101) and then clarifies his idea that conceptual systems, such as mathematics, logic, aesthetics and ethics are different "realms of reality," each one showing a "peculiar form of relation" (James 1911: 102). The point is that these systems are not perfectly closed off or complete, but that they can interpenetrate somehow. All these vocabularies are fundamental tools which help us to deal in the most agreeable way with different domains of reality.

As becomes evident, radical pluralism is the framework for James's "Pragmatic instrumentalist" view, and we can also make reference here to Perry's consideration that "pluralism [...] is indistinguishable from 'radical empiricism'."¹ James is a *constructivist*, and Schwartz wishes to make definitively clear that Pragmatist constructivism does not in any way mean anti-realism, not even for theoretical entities posed by science. Pragmatists rather enlarged their definition of reality to include perceived objects, for instance, instead of reducing it to only scientific objects. Moreover, he argues that although James's radical empiricism argues for useful discourses to be grounded in experience, he is aware that "in the context of inquiry the 'given' is a myth" and holism should prevail. James is not pretending to define once and for all valuable concepts by reducing them to "experience or reports of observation" (86). The Pragmatists' work of the demystification of language, although it challenges classical semantics and classical copy theories of truth, does not need to establish any ontology as privileged. In fact, every system of reality has an ontological background, and ontology has to "work" just by letting its system work. In this respect, James's radical pluralism finds the difference between James's "constructivist, pragmatic account of inquiry" (87) and the anti-realist instrumentalist picture of a unique world.

The fact that *different and contrasting* systems of concepts exist obliges us to reconsider our meaning of truth. Following E. Mach, W. Ostwald and other scientific logicians, James insists that theories are but *functional* descriptions of reality; they are conceptual *shortcomings* leading us from some parts of experience to other parts of experience. There is no *ringing* conclusion possible, no absolute point of view offering *absolute criteria* to decide which type of thinking is absolutely *true*. As philosophers, all that we can state is that each conceptual system shows itself to be more *functional* in a particular sphere of life, but no one system is completely sufficient under all different respects; they can be compared in relation to their *use*, not to any static idea of truth as a "simple duplication by the mind of a ready-made and given reality" (James 1907: 93).

1. Perry R. B., (1935), *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 2, Boston, Little, Brown, & Company, 586.

This work perfectly fits the current revaluation of James as a relevant interlocutor in contemporary epistemological conversations, as well as an important defender of scientific research and freedom. The book is very interesting also because of Schwartz's attempt both to follow James's arguments and, at the same time, to integrate them with his own comments and references. Unfortunately, some very interesting comments are just passingly mentioned but not extensively analyzed. As to Analytic references, some classical names are missing. For instance, there is only one indirect reference to Hilary Putnam, as if the author prefers to privilege more direct readers of James, as Dewey or explore different associative paths. Steven Meyers² complains about the absence of A. Whitehead among the authors Schwartz refers to in his book and considers this lack as a consequence of the great influence of Goodman on his philosophical perspective. Schwartz's intention to make a selective and very focused reading of those points in *Pragmatism* "which seem to bear directly" on contemporary Analytic problems, in the line of Dewey, cannot be considered equally consistent for this reason. Dewey's position when reviewing James's work, more than one hundred years ago, is not the same as that of Schwartz's today; overall, Meyers remarks that Dewey was cautiously making some observations at great length without performing any decisive selection of contemporary problems. Meyers's point aims at warning against the misleadingly precise and univocal interpretation of the history of ideas, and the apparently uncontroversial overlapping of present and past meanings that interpretative issues may assume for Analytic philosophers.

In conclusion, despite his preferences as interpreter, Schwartz succeeds in avoiding to canonize James's words in isolation from their context. He is very confident with James's texts and particularly convinced of the importance of some aspects of James's *anti-intellectualist* stance. As Schwartz sees it, with James the risk is a vulgar and rather superficial understanding of his discourse, which must be distinguished from any antagonism to whatever intellectual effort to make serious scientific research. James aims at patiently displaying – through his restless efforts of demystification of meanings – crucial implications of the Pragmatic conception of experience. Rethinking *Pragmatism* is itself a work of continuous demystification of James's words and reorientation of references, the same project that its author had been carrying on all his life. One may say that James's beautiful style of writing has been somewhat misleading for many readers, because his words seem to be as easily-flowing as his ability to express them; but they still require and represent serious "rumination." Schwartz succeeds not only in conveying his ideas concerning interesting similarities between James and some Analytic philosophers, but also in stressing the peculiar controversies and originalities within James's Pragmatism.

2. Meyers S., (2015), "Prefiguring Whitehead: Reading Jamesian Pragmatism with Stengers and Latours," in B. G. Henning, W. T. Meyers & J. D. Johns, (eds.), *Thinking with Whitehead and the American Pragmatists: Experience and Reality*, Lexington Books, 58-9.